

# Verdi

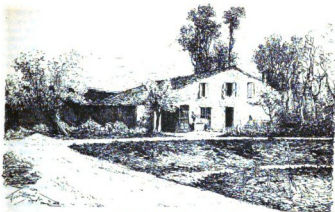
## VERDI, THE COMPOSER.

FEW biographies of modern musicians have been written whereof the heroes still live, and among the men concerning whose personal characteristics very little has been told in the public prints Giuseppe Verdi stands first and foremost. It may be urged that, as an individual is best known by his deeds, so can Italy's greatest contemporary composer be studied to most advantage through his performances; nevertheless, as an acquaintance with the writer's twenty-seven operas will not enlighten one as to the noteworthy incidents of the composer's career, his appearance, or his peculiar habits, it is safe to presume that some curiosity on these points is still unsated. Under the circumstances Verdi's publisher, Signor Ricordi of Milan, has a claim on our gratitude for gathering in a neat volume a number of anecdotes touching the composer, printed long ago by M. Arthur Pougin in a Parisian musical journal; for supplementing these anecdotes with corrections and addenda, contributed by Verdi's friends; and for giving them, in a rather discursive way, perhaps, to the world at large. Time will come when a more ambitious and comprehensive work will be welcomed by the public and especially by *dilettanti*; and the production of a book of this sort will certainly loosen the hold of Ricordi's publication upon the thoughtful reader. For the present, however, the gossip character of the Milanese sketch, and the belief that a fair proportion of its contents will repay rehearsal and translation into English, may be an excuse for drawing liberally upon its facts, figures, and illustrations—the compiler of the volume carefully avoiding comment and criticism—for the behoof of the musician's English-speaking admirers.

The composer of the best-known operas of the age was born at Roncole, a small village in the duchy of Parma, three miles from Busseto. His father and mother, Carlo and Luigia Verdi, kept a wretched *osteria*, and as the patronage of the whole population of two hundred souls would have been insufficient to yield a living income, they carried on, besides, a petty trade in tobacco, coffee, sugar, and groceries. The exact date of their son's birth has never been ascertained, but the baptismal entry in the register of the church of San Michele being dated October 11, 1813, it is pretty certain that the infant must have been between twenty-four and forty-eight

hours old when christened Fortuninus Josephus Franciscus—to quote the Latin names embodied in the formal certificate. His childhood went by quietly enough. We learn that his mother bestowed most attention upon his education; that the lad was passionately fond of her; that he was rather timid, reserved, and even serious for his age; and that the first indications of his liking for music were afforded by his partiality for hand-organs, which he invariably followed about until their owners were far beyond the last houses of the village. Circumstances proved favorable to the development of his musical talent. There was no school at Roncole, but the church of San Michele was possessed of an organ, and the boy's parents, recognizing that their son would ere long have to earn his livelihood, thought that by confiding him to the care of the local organist he might in due course be appointed his successor. After a three-years' course of study the wishes of Verdi's parents were gratified, and the lad became organist of the parish church. He was then in his eleventh year, and tolerably ignorant, no doubt, in matters familiar to schoolboys generally; so his father at once decided that he should take up his abode at Busseto, where he could at least obtain elementary instruction, while discharging his duties as village organist on Sundays and holidays. Verdi sustained the double part of pupil and *maestro* for the seven years of a Biblical term of servitude. On week-days he studied at Busseto, and, on Sundays and whenever the numerous *feste* of the church came about, he was beheld at the organ of San Michele. Small as were his emoluments, they were not to be despised, for his parents were well-nigh as poor as people in sunny Italy can be. The honoraria were insignificant enough for all that: including fees for funeral services, christenings, and marriages, they did not exceed one hundred *lire* (twenty dollars) per annum,—this slender amount, however, being somewhat augmented by the collection which, in accordance with an established usage, the organist always took up at harvest-time. Two years rolled by, and young Verdi learned to read, write, and cipher. As a reward for his industry his father got him employment in a distillery managed by one Antonio Barezzi, an amateur of no mean ability. Verdi's admission to Barezzi's household finally determined the bent of his career.

Busseto is a small town with a population



THE BIRTHPLACE OF GIUSEPPE VERDI, RONCOLE, ITALY.

of two thousand souls. The history of the duchy of Parma records that its inhabitants were always noted for their ardent love of music; and Barezzi was among the most faithful worshippers of local traditions. His abode was the headquarters of the Philharmonic Society of the place; it was provided with a small concert-hall, in which the musical performances of the season were given, and the rooms were filled with instruments of every description. Under the influence of these surroundings Verdi's penchant for his art grew stronger and stronger. He devoted all his leisure hours to close study, never missed a rehearsal and concert held under Signor Barezzi's roof, and did an amount of copyist's work that finally won him the good graces of Ferdinando Provesi, his teacher, who was the town organist and the conductor of all musical affairs occurring at Busseto. Provesi conceived a strong affection for young Verdi, and when the latter attained his seventeenth year his instructor resigned the position of *maestro* of the Philharmonic Society in favor of his pupil, who also replaced him occasionally at the organ of the cathedral. The archives of the society contain abundant proofs of the youth's industry. He composed a good deal, instrumented his compositions, and copied the parts with his own hand. It was clear, however, that so small a place as Busseto offered no field for the exercise of his talent. He soon became aware of the fact, and conferred on the subject with Barezzi and Provesi. Milan was not remote, and the question arose

as to the advisability of going thither. Barezzi set about gathering the requisite funds, and succeeded in obtaining for his *protégé* a yearly income of six hundred francs, payable for two successive years, the total amount constituting the revenue of one of four scholarships in the gift of the Monte di Pietà of Busseto, a charitable institution founded in the days of the plague for the purpose of helping the poor and encouraging native talent. As the annual stipend of six hundred francs appeared insufficient to meet the young man's needs, Barezzi made up the requisite amount, and, further, gave Verdi letters to Seletti, a personal friend, to whose care he commended him with special earnestness.

Verdi's first disappointment befell him in Milan. Immediately on arriving, having been assigned a room in Seletti's house, he visited the Conservatory and applied for admission. The institution was then directed by Francesco Basily, an aged musician of unquestionable skill and experience, but from all accounts a man utterly devoid of artistic instinct and sensibility. Strange to say, he could make nothing of the new-comer, and Verdi's application was rejected on the ground that the youth showed no disposition for music. Fétis, in his "Universal Biography," suggests odd reasons for Basily's decision. To his thinking the icy air, impassible countenance, thin lips, and steely *ensemble* might have indicated the candidate's intelligence and fitness for diplomacy, but could never have been the outward signs of the soul of a creative artist. Aside from the

worthlessness of Fétis's argument in favor of admitting a student on the promise of his looks, it is evident that the Belgian writer never saw the composer under the influence of unusual excitement. A glance at Verdi seated at the conductor's desk during a representation of "Aida" in the Paris Opera House would dispel any uncertainty as to the expressiveness and power of the strong if simple and rugged face of the great musician. Fortunately all Basily's co-laborers shared not his views. The youth was not discouraged, and instead of withdrawing from the contest he turned elsewhere for instruction. He had a letter to Alessandro Rolla, leader of the orchestra of La Scala, and Rolla sent him to Vincenzo Lavigna, who at that period was engaged as *maestro al cembalo*, or accompanist, in the same theater, and had brought forth some operas which had achieved a fair measure of success. Verdi addressed himself to Lavigna, and laid before him the same compositions he had presented to Basily. The result was wholly different, for Lavigna instantly consented to give Verdi lessons, and soon afterwards predicted to Barezzi, who never lost sight of his favorite, that the time would come when Verdi would do honor to his master and country. Meanwhile the student became known in the art-circles of the Lombard capital. There was then in existence in Milan — and there still exists there, by the way — an association of *dilettanti* calling themselves the Società Filodrammatica, that gave a semi-public entertainment on Friday of each week. In 1831 the Società was preparing to bring out Haydn's "Creation," when, of a sudden, the *maestro* in charge took fright at the difficulty of his task and laid down his *baton*. One Masini, a singing-teacher, who was to direct the choral part of the performance, said to the managing committee, over whose deliberations Count Renato Borromeo presided:

"I know but one man here that can help us out of our plight — if *maestrino*."

"Who is the *maestrino*?" inquired Duke Visconti.

"His name is Verdi," was Masini's answer, "and he reads the most puzzling scores at sight."

"Well," said the Duke, "send for him."

Masini obeyed, and Verdi speedily made his appearance. He was handed the score of "The Creation," and he undertook to direct the performance. Rehearsals commenced, and the final rendering of the oratorio was set down as most creditable to all concerned. Toward the same period he devoted his attention to the composition of several works intended for the public, and marches, overtures, symphonies, and cantatas followed each other

in rapid succession. The marches were mainly composed for the Philharmonic Society of Busseto, where they were performed on the holy days of the church, and one of the series was refashioned and did duty as the funeral march in "Nabucco"; while fragments of other achievements bearing the same date and never published came in with good effect in "I Lombardi."

In 1833 Ferdinando Provesi passed away, at the ripe age of seventy. The Monte di Pietà had contributed to Verdi's maintenance with a view to securing his services as successor to Provesi, and the debt of gratitude had to be paid. Verdi returned to Busseto, and carried on a protracted struggle with one Ferrari, a mediocre musician, who coveted the position of *maestro di musica*, and was supported in his claims by the clergy. For four or five years Busseto, thanks to the obstinacy of the rival parties, profited by the labors of two *maestri*. The admirers of Ferrari had possession of the cathedral, but Verdi and his orchestral and choral forces were accorded the use of a small chapel belonging to the Franciscan monks, and there the motets of the young composer were listened to every Sunday, while an afternoon performance of the band on the piazza followed divine service, and attracted the whole population. His more pretentious works were executed in the Franciscan church, and when Verdi played the organ and directed the performance of some new composition, the cathedral presented a beggarly array of empty benches, while the rival house of prayer was filled to overflowing. His fame, moreover, extended in every direction, and ere long all the villages of the vicinity strove to secure a visit from the *maestro* and his associates. Often two or three omnibuses drove over the hot white roads, and bore off Verdi and his choir and band to some hospitable hamlet near by. Mass and vespers were sung, an *al fresco* concert was given, and a festival day was merrily spent. The southern demonstrations of joy and enthusiasm with which the *maestro* was greeted on occasions of this kind can hardly have been forgotten, even amid the pomp and brilliancy of later triumphs.

During Verdi's stay at Busseto, which ended in 1838, when he quitted the town and took up his abode in Milan, one important event in his private life demands mention. Barezzi, although the father of a numerous family, had always treated his *protégé* as a son. The terms of intimacy upon which Verdi lived with his benefactor's children ripened, in respect of Barezzi's eldest daughter, into a stronger feeling. His boyish attachment for Margherita Barezzi, who is described as hav-

ing been comely and intelligent, developed into love. Margherita was impressed with the talent and industry of the youth, and she believed in his future. The young people sought Barezzi's consent to their marriage, and the father met the request with a reply that he should never refuse to give a child of his in marriage to a worthy young man whose capacity and steadiness he regarded as quite as valuable a possession as wealth. The wedding was celebrated in 1836, when Verdi was in his twenty-third year. Two years afterward, when Margherita had borne him two children, his engagement with the municipality having expired, and the annual honorarium of three hundred lire being quite insufficient for the support of the composer and his family, his *larsi* and *penates* were made ready for removal, and once again the musician journeyed toward Milan.

From the day of his arrival in the chief city of Lombardy, Verdi became possessed of a single thought and object: success on the lyric stage. Fortune served him admirably from the first. He became acquainted with a young poet, Temistocle Solera by name, whose ambition ran in the same groove. Solera was but nineteen, and a good musician as well as a clever librettist. The two aspirants to fame having determined to strike up an alliance, Solera wrote a libretto, entitled "Oberto, Conte di San Bonifacio," to which Verdi composed the music. The first performance of "Oberto" was given at La Scala on the evening of November 17, 1839, and the work was received with so much favor that Merelli, who was then the *impresario* of the house, bound Verdi by contract to supply him with three additional operas. If Merelli had stipulated that the novelties were to be *opere serie*, the result would have been more felicitous for both manager and artist. Unluckily he did not, and one of the few failures of Verdi's art life was the consequence. For some occult reason he chose an old libretto by Felice Romani that one Gyrowetz had already set to music, and addressed himself to the task of furnishing it with a score. The current of the composer's talent never lay in the direction of *opere buffe* or *mezzo carattere* music, and circumstances made his attempt to produce comic music more hopeless still. While busy with his new work an event occurred that almost broke his heart and unsettled his reason. His beloved wife was stricken down with brain fever, and after a few days' illness she died, leaving the composer in a condition more easily imagined than described. Though beside himself with grief, he had to finish the opera he had begun, and it will be generally conceded that, under the

influence of such a misfortune, the production of music of a light order was out of the question. "Un Giorno di Regno," under which title the fresh setting of "Il finto Stanislao" was made known at La Scala on September 5, 1840, had a memorable downfall; it proved, to use an Italian term, *un fiasco d'una sera*.

The failure of "Un Giorno di Regno" was a sad blow to Verdi's aspirations. After the death of his wife, and before the first representation of his second opera, he had resolved upon renouncing dramatic composition, and, in fact, his distress was so acute that his sole apparent desire was to seek solitude and oblivion. The ill-success of his latest achievement strengthened his decision to cease writing for the stage, and, after the withdrawal of "Un Giorno" from the boards, he waited upon Merelli and asked to be released from his contract. The fiasco of "Un Giorno" had been attended with so much *éclat* that it seemed hard to realize that the *impresario* would refuse to grant the composer's request. He did so, however, and it was only after a long discussion that he consented not to enforce the obligation. "He it as you will," said Merelli at last. "I cancel the agreement; but remember, should you ever change your mind, my house is always open to you, and on the same terms as formerly." The grateful musician grasped Merelli's hand and pressed it warmly. Then he hastened home, gave orders to sell all his furniture except the Viennese piano that his wife was wont to play upon, and started for Busseto, where he took up his abode with his brother-in-law, and for a few months lived in melancholy contemplation of the past.

None of Verdi's associates expressed the slightest astonishment when, before the year was at an end, they met him again in Milan. The dull life of Busseto was scarcely suited to a man used to the feverish stir and stimulating tumult of a great city; and although Verdi proposed to devote himself wholly to teaching, he yearned for the inspiring impressions of metropolitan scenes. But he clung to his determination not to write for the stage, and Merelli's hints and entreaties went for a long time unheeded. Chance turned out the motive power that urged him to action. One evening, when about to look in at La Scala for a few minutes, he encountered Merelli. "I was just thinking of you," was the *impresario's* greeting. "Come into my office." Verdi followed him, and Merelli proceeded to explain that, requiring a libretto for Nicolai, he had charged Solera with writing it, but that Nicolai had declared the libretto unmusical and generally worthless, and had returned it. "I am not quite ignorant on these subjects," continued Merelli, "and I confess I do not

share the composer's opinion; still, as I do not propose to pay Solera for valueless work, I should like your judgment. Will you oblige me by glancing at the libretto?"

"Certainly," was the answer.

Verdi took the book, entered the auditorium, exchanged a few words with an acquaintance, and then walked home. He promptly set about fulfilling the promise made to Merelli, and, opening Solera's libretto, began to read it. Struck by the grandeur of the Biblical story chosen by the poet, tempted by the opportunities it held out to a composer, and carried away by the pathetic and forceful situations that unfolded themselves in quick succession, he finally wrought himself into a sort of fever, under the spell of which he seated himself at the piano and improvised a score, adapting the melodies, as he progressed, to Solera's verses, and keeping to the task until dawn made the lamp burn dim and the last scene of the opera was reached. The impression produced by the perusal of "Nabucco" was profound, and proved to be durable; but it was unrevealed by word or look when the musician, that same afternoon, called upon Merelli.

"Here," said he, "is Solera's libretto. I find it excellent, and am much astonished that Nicolai should not have recognized its worth."

"If so it be," was Merelli's reply, "we can come to an understanding. Nicolai having declined to set the book to music, I have sent him another, on which he is now engaged. As 'Nabucco' pleases you, take it home, write your score, and when it is finished we shall bring it out at La Scala."

"No, no," said Verdi; "you know very well that I shall not compose any more music for the stage."

"You are a child," retorted Merelli; "here is 'Nabucco,' and to work!"

Verdi yielded to Merelli's affectionate pleading, and, silencing the scruples that had kept him idle for a year, he commenced wedding Solera's words to his own inspired themes. While thus engaged Nicolai completed the score of the libretto intrusted to him by Merelli. But the composer of "Il Proscritto" was no luckier with this opera than Verdi had been with "Un Giorno," and it turned out one of the noisiest failures recorded in the annals of La Scala. Merelli, of course, was most anxious to produce Verdi's work, which was finished in a few months. Only one obstacle lay in the path of success—the fact that the choral forces of La Scala were rather limited in numbers. Merelli declined to increase their force, whereupon one Pasini, a well-known dilettante, offered to defray the expense of a supplementary chorus. Verdi proudly rejected

the offer and assumed the responsibility of some additional engagements himself. In other respects Merelli was sufficiently liberal, and the scenery and costumes were quite new. It was agreed between the composer and the manager that the amount to be paid for the right of publishing the score should be divided between them.

The success of the opera began with the earliest rehearsals. During their progress, if the chroniclers are to be trusted, the theater was in a state of revolution. The style of the music was so novel, its progress, as illustrative of the action of the drama, so swift and powerful, and its tone-color so brilliant, as to excite wonder and enthusiasm. The demonstrations of approval that attended the final rehearsals were insignificant in comparison with the incidents of the first performance of the opera. An ancient custom, still adhered to in those days, made it incumbent on the composer to sit in the orchestra, between the principal violoncellist and the principal double-bass player, nominally for the purpose of turning the leaves of the music placed before these humble *confères*, but in reality to stand or fall, in person, with his work. On March 9, 1842, when Verdi took his seat beside the first cello, this man, Merighi, the instructor of the world-renowned Piatti, said: "*Maestrino*, I wish I were in your place to-night!" His good opinion of the composer's chances of success was not exaggerated. The applause was frequent and tremendous, and the finale of the first act, especially, called forth a display of frenzied delight such as northern readers can scarcely realize. Of the artists that took part in the representation of "Nabucco" only two need be mentioned in this notice, Giorgio Ronconi and Signorina Strep-pioni. The great baritone was then in the zenith of his fame, and his superb voice and matchless histrionic talent must have contributed largely to the impressiveness of the opera. Signorina Strep-pioni, whose artistic career extended over a few seasons only, would hardly be remembered for her achievements, but is not likely to be forgotten in her latest *role*, that of the composer's wife. She married Verdi a few years after the production of "Nabucco," and quitted the stage long before her youth had vanished.

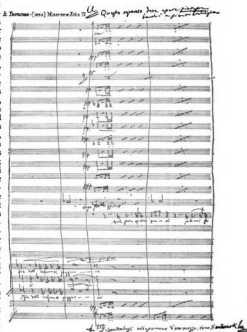
The success of "Nabucco" placed Verdi on a plane with Donizetti, Mercadante, Pacini, and Ricci; and on the evening of the third representation of the new work he was summoned into the managerial office and formally notified that he had been chosen to write the opera for the *gran stagione di carnevale*. Fifteen months elapsed, and "I Lombardi" was brought forth, with Mme.

Frezolini in the leading character. The Archbishop of Milan, Cardinal Gaisruck, endeavored to prevent the representation of the work, arguing that certain portions of the libretto were sacrilegious; but the chief of police, Torresani by name, looked into the matter and took the risk of allowing the curtain to rise upon "I Lombardi," which had its first hearing on February 11, 1843, and was received, as expected, with great favor. The musician's next victory was won in the Teatro della Fenice in Venice on March 9, 1844, when "Ernani" was given. The libretto, founded upon Hugo's play, was supplied by the poet Francesco Maria Piave, a writer of no marked skill, but a dramatist of sufficient cleverness and pliancy to carry out the composer's instructions. Piave, who subsequently wrote the libretti of "Rigoletto," "La Traviata," and half a dozen other operas, sank in due course into a sort of literary slavery. His pride became wholly subservient to the musician's plans and whims, and criticisms as to the lack of dignity involved in continual self-sacrifice were invariably met with the answer, in the local dialect: "*El mestre vol cussì e basta.*" In respect of "Ernani" and most of his other achievements, the *maestro's* judgment, be it noted, was correct, and the first-named work was as enthusiastically greeted in Venice as was "Nabucco" in Milan.

It would be impossible, however, to bring within the limits of this article a record even of the thousand and one incidents that attended the early performances of the twenty-seven operas which Italy's great composer has made known to the world. The scope of this notice renders it necessary to make the merest mention of each successive production, and to dwell with like brevity on the more important events of the musician's art existence. "I Due Foscari," given in 1844 at the Teatro dell' Argentina in Rome, was only moderately successful, and "Giovanna d' Arco," brought out at La Scala on February 15, 1845, though more favored, produced a rather mild impression in Milan, and a somewhat unsatisfactory one whenever it was sung elsewhere. "Alzira," at the San Carlo in Naples, and "Attila," at La Fenice, were no more fortunate than "Giovanna," and "Macbeth," listened to at the Pergola in Florence in 1847, was coolly received. The last-named opera, recast as to libretto and score, was essayed at the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris in 1865, and fared no better than in its youth. Some of its preceding performances in Italy, however, created no little excitement. It was given at La Fenice in Venice just before the revolution of 1848. Palma, a Spanish tenor and a great Liberal, stepped forth in the third act and sang the

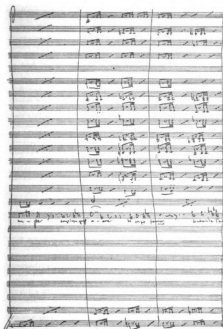
famous air "La patria tradita," embodying the appeal of a betrayed land for freedom from her oppressors. Palma bore a tri-colored cockade in his hat, and his delivery of the verses and music was so impassioned that the public, in the words of Kean, rose at him, joined in the chorus, and gave vent to "seditious" cries. The Government feared that the aria might be the spark that would fire the mine, and matters assumed so alarming an aspect that the interference of the royal grenadiers was finally sought and order temporarily restored. It was not known then, and probably few persons are even now aware, that the words of "La patria tradita" were written by Andrea Maffei, one of the most accomplished of Italian *liberati*, whom critics christened the "honey-tongued poet," and whose translations of Milton and Moore are accounted among the happiest efforts of the kind. How marked the contrast between Maffei's lines and the turgid and conventional "lengths" of Piave may be observed by the least analytical reader of the libretto. Meantime Verdi's fame had traveled from Italy to France, and from France to England, whence a commission for an opera ultimately reached him. "I Masnadieri," founded upon Schiller's "Die Räuber," was its fruit, and the work was brought forth at Her Majesty's Theatre in London on July 25, 1847. It was listened to with attention, but coldly, and subsequent performances in Italy were received quite as indifferently. "Il Corsaro," founded upon Byron's "Corsair," and performed at Trieste in October, 1848, and "La Battaglia di Legnano," given in Rome in January, 1849, were also unsuccessful, though the opportuneness of some of the situations of the latter opera caused its first representations to elicit considerable applause. Better fortune was in store for Verdi's next achievement. He had engaged to enrich the San Carlo in Naples with a new opera, and "Luisa Miller" was in readiness in the fall of 1849. Verdi started for Naples to conduct the rehearsals, and at this stage of events his troubles commenced. "Alzira," sung at the San Carlo four years previous, had failed to please, and the composer's Neapolitan friends, with the native superstition strong upon them, lay the blame of the *fiasco* upon the "evil eye" of the composer Capececiattolo, who was regarded as a *jettatore* of the very first water, and whose approach was dreaded accordingly by every right-minded Neapolitan. As soon as Verdi reached Naples and was settled at the Hôtel de Russie, his intimates and admirers, to prevent the possibility of a meeting with Capececiattolo, stood guard over him, telling themselves off in watches, and doing sentry duty at his door day and night.

If he walked the streets, one of his friends preceded him, another followed him, and a third and fourth worshiper strolled along on either side of him. This eternal vigilance was rewarded, and, Capecelatro having been kept at a safe distance until the night of December 8, 1849, "Luisa Miller" was successful. Strange to say, however, the effect of the last act was far less potent than that of its forerunners, and this, according to Neapolitan belief, in consequence of an odd occurrence. Verdi had just left his box and was behind the curtain, examining the scenery, when a man rushed from a wing and threw his arms around the composer's neck; it was Capecelatro. Before Verdi could free himself from his embrace one of the "borders" came crashing down at their feet, grazing the *maestro's* head as it fell. The act began a few minutes later, and its impression was much less satisfactory than that produced by the remainder of the score. Who, under such circumstances, would venture to deny the influence of the *fetatura*? The year 1850 was marked by a failure—that of "Stiffelio," afterwards refashioned, and rechristened "Aroldo." "Stiffelio" was sung at Trieste. But the day of several great triumphs was now at hand, for "Rigoletto," "Il Trovatore," and "La Traviata" were about to be given to the world. The production of "Rigoletto" was marked by numerous difficulties. Verdi, as a rule, chooses his own subjects and plans his librettos, and on this occasion he directed Piave to draw his material from Hugo's "Roi s'amuse." Piave obeyed, and called his work "La Maledizione." It was intended for La Fenice in Venice, and therefore had to be submitted to the Austrian censorship. The officials, made aware of the fount of Piave's inspiration, forbade the production of the opera until all the characters had been changed. Thus the *King* became the *Duke of Mantua*, while *Triboulet* was turned into *Rigoletto*, and the local color of the story quite done away with. The censorship having at last proclaimed Piave's book inoffensive, the composer seized upon it, went into retirement at Busseto, and emerged with the score of "Rigoletto," which was produced on March 11, 1851. Its success was most pronounced, and the opera had twenty-two consecutive



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performances before it was transferred to the boards of every theater in Italy, and soon afterwards to the stage of every opera-house in Europe. Almost two years elapsed between the first night of "Rigoletto" and that of "Il Trovatore," at the Teatro Apollo in Rome. On the day of the first representation the Tiber had overflowed its banks, and that portion of the Eternal City in which the theater is situated was flooded; yet hundreds of *dilettanti* stood with their feet in the water from nine o'clock in the morning, waiting for the doors to be opened. Their patience was rewarded; the occasion was a memorable one, and "Il Trovatore" achieved an almost unprecedented success. "La Traviata," brought out within two months thereafter, was first greeted with positive disfavor. On the 7th of March, 1853, Verdi wrote from Venice to Signor Emmanuele Muzio, his pupil and friend:



ORIGINAL SCORE OF "IL TROVATORE."

"'La Traviata' last night was a failure. Am I at fault, or are the singers? Time will decide." As a matter of fact, the first act was applauded, but the remainder of the opera was listened to in unbroken silence. The unfitness of the artists for their work seems to have been the chief cause of the *fiasco*. Signora Donatelli was altogether too healthy a *Violetta*; Signor Graziani, the *Alfredo*, was frightfully hoarse, and Signor Varesi, the baritone, is reported to have considered his *role* so far beneath his merits as to have persistently slighted it, both in respect of action and singing. The music, too, was so different in style from that which these persons were used to interpret that they failed to endow it with the requisite tone-color and accent. And, finally, the eye was wearied by a monotonous succession of men and women in the somber garments constituting modern attire; for "La

Traviata" was not then performed with dresses of the period of Louis XIII., but in the garb of the nineteenth century. Only a twelvemonth was needed to bring about the composer's revenge. "La Traviata" was revived at another theater in Venice a year afterwards, with a slightly abridged score, with new artists, and with scenic costume similar to that in use nowadays. The verdict of the audience reversed the opinion expressed at La Fenice in 1853, and ever since "La Traviata" has held a prominent place in the *répertoire* of the leading opera-houses of the civilized world.

Space is wanting, as observed already, for minute particulars concerning the production of each of Verdi's works. His "Vêpres Siciliennes," composed on a libretto by Scribe and Duveyrier, in view of the Paris exhibition of 1855, was sung with success in the French capital on June 13th of that year; "Simone Boccanegra" was unsuccessful in Venice in 1857. Possibly Piave, whose librettos are not to be commended for conspicuous dramatic or literary worth, should have been held responsible for more than his usual share of the joint task, one of Verdi's most impartial commentators declaring that he had to read through the libretto six times before he could make out its purport. Then came a revised edition of "Stiffelio," under the title of "Aroldo," and in 1859, at the Teatro Apollo in Rome, "Un Ballo in Maschera," touching the performance of which a few details must be supplied. It was originally intended for the San Carlo Theater. Verdi was in Naples and about to commence rehearsals, when, on January 13, 1858, news of Orsini's attempt upon the life of the Emperor Napoleon was received. The police became more vigilant than ever, and the censors were so fearful of creating an excitement that they immediately refused to license the representation of "Un Ballo." After the abortive conspiracy in Paris it was deemed impolitic to depict upon the stage the murder of a king, and it must be remembered that the libretto of the new work was founded upon the story of Gustavus



III., by Scribe, the Swedish monarch not having yet been transformed into "Ricardo Warwick, Governor of Boston." The Neapolitan *impresario* besought the composer to adapt his music to a new plot; the musician obstinately refused to accede to the request. The whole population sided with Verdi, who would at once have quitted Naples for good, but for the fact that the management held him to his contract to produce a new opera. At length a compromise was agreed upon, and Verdi, having bound himself to write another score as soon as practicable, was allowed to depart for Rome, where the board of censors, after compelling the composer to change the historical personages into the purely mythical characters now introduced, sanctioned the production of "Un Ballo." It was sung in the presence of a most enthusiastic audience at the Apollo Theater, on the evening of February 17, 1859.

Between 1859 and the present year Verdi has written but three operas, all of which have been composed in fulfillment of commissions for opera-houses on foreign soil: "La Forza del Destino," in deference to a command from the Court of St. Petersburg; "Don Carlos," in execution of an order from the Paris Opera-House; and "Aida," by command of the Viceroy of Egypt. The plot of "La Forza" was taken by Piave from a Spanish drama entitled "Don Alvar," which a third of a century ago was received with applause in Madrid. The success of the play, however, did not insure the success of the opera, and "La Forza" was a disappointment. So was "Don Carlos," given at the Paris Opera-House on March 11, 1867, and listened to by the Imperial Court and an audience of exceptional brilliancy. Verdi's ultra admirers insist to this day that the dissatisfaction expressed by the Empress Eugénie at the allusions to the priesthood chilled the enthusiasm of the imperial household, and naturally reacted upon the public; but the cause of the comparative failure of the work was, by general consent, to be sought in the somber coloring and labored style of the music.

"Aida" is to be numbered among the rare efforts that have been successful in spite of being put forth, so to speak, "to order." A new Italian opera-house had just been built in Cairo, and the Khedive, Ismail Pasha, applied to Verdi, asking his terms for an opera to be written upon a libretto provided with a national subject. The musician demanded four thousand pounds sterling, and six thousand if his presence was required to conduct the rehearsals. The proposal was accepted, and a sketch of the plot of the libretto, suggested

by Mariette Bey, the celebrated Egyptian scholar, sent to Verdi for his approval. Subsequently Ghislanzoni wrote out the libretto, to which, by the way, the composer himself added the powerful scene of *Rudames's* trial, in the third act. When the opera was in readiness Verdi was requested to direct the rehearsals. His dread of the sea led him to decline the invitation,—in spite of which fact the Khedive generously paid him the full sum of six thousand pounds,—and Signor Bottesini was chosen to occupy the conductor's desk. The scenery and costumes were making in Paris, on designs from Mariette Bey, when the Franco-Prussian war broke out, and the *matériel*, stored in the beleaguered city, had to remain there until peace was declared. The first representation of "Aida" was thus deferred a full twelvemonth beyond the date originally decided upon. It took place, at last, on the 24th of December, 1871. From the dress-rehearsal, which was held on the evening of the 23d, and lasted from half-past seven o'clock until half-past three in the morning, it was feared that the first hearing would have to be postponed once more; but the Khedive would brook no further delay, and on the next evening everything went well. "Aida" was completely successful. Its production at La Scala, in Milan, six weeks later, gave birth to one of those enthusiastic demonstrations of approval that are never witnessed outside of Italy. Since the production of "Aida" only one comparative novelty bearing Verdi's name has come before the public. This was in shape of a *rifacimento* of his early "Simone Boccanegra," and was well received in Italy and, if we are not mistaken, in Spain. The baritone Maurel, whom English and American audiences have not forgotten, was elected by the composer to represent the principal personage of the opera.

Even in Italy one can find detractors of Verdi, though very few. I imagine, are notable for the frankness and business talent of one Signor Prospero Bertani. "Aida," it appears, was sung in Parma early in May, 1872. On May 8th Verdi received from Reggio, dated May 7th, the following curious epistle:

"SIGNOR VERDE GENTILISSIMO:

"On the 2d instant I proceeded to Parma, attracted thither by the celebrated opera 'Aida,' and half an hour before the curtain rose I occupied seat No. 120, expecting much of the entertainment. I admired the *mise en scène*, listened with great pleasure to the artists, and endeavored to lose nothing. After the opera I inquired of myself whether I was satisfied, and received a negative answer. I returned to Reggio, and in the railway carriage hearkened to the passengers' opinions; all were agreed that 'Aida' was a great opera. Then I determined to hear it anew, and on the 4th instant journeyed to Parma again and tried hard to get along without a seat, but was finally compelled, on

account of the crush, to pay five *lire* for a stall, whence I watched the performance with comfort. Afterwards I came to the conclusion that no number in the opera awakes enthusiasm or electrifies, that without spectacular incidents it would never be permitted to come to a finish, and that, after having been given in two or three theaters, it will be consigned to the dust of the archives. Now, my dear Verdi, you cannot imagine how vexed I am at having expended on these two occasions thirty-two *lire*, and especially when I remember that I am dependent upon my family for support: the money laid out assumes the shape of horrible specters and disturbs my peace of mind. Hence I look to you for speedy reimbursement of my outlay. My account is as below:

Railway — One trip to Parma.....	L. 3.60
" Return.....	3.30
Seat at Theatre.....	2.00
Wretched Supper at Station.....	2.00
<hr/>	
Same trip, repeated.....	15.90
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Total.....	L. 31.80

"I hope you will relieve my annoyance, and in this belief, salute you, heartily,  
"BERTANI.  
"Address, Bertani Prospero, Via S. Domenico, N. 5."

The astonishment of Verdi when he received this epistle may be imagined; however, he thought fit to look into the matter, and wrote to Signor Ricordi to have his banker at Reggio pay Signor Bertani—if such a person was in existence—the sum of L. 27.80. "I am aware that this is not the entire amount he claims," added the *maestro*, "but as for paying for his supper at the station—oh no! He might have had supper at home." And he concludes: "Be it understood that you are to take a receipt for the money, and also a small memorandum, by the terms of which Signor Bertani engages not to hear any of my new operas; he will thus avoid the visitation of specters and spare me the necessity of paying additional traveling expenses." Ricordi wrote to Reggio, and to his astonishment discovered that Bertani was no imaginary being, and that he was in sober earnest. In due season Verdi was handed the document of which a translation follows, and the story was brought to a close:

"REGGIO, May 15, 1872.

"The undersigned declares having received from *il maestro* G. Verdi L. 27.80 in full reimbursement of two trips to Parma to listen to 'Aida,' the composer of which opera thinks fit I should be repaid for the journeys. I not having found the work to my liking. It is also understood that I shall not again hear any new operas by the *maestro* Verdi, save at my own expense, whatever my judgment as to their merits.

(Signed) "BERTANI PROSPERO."

The list of Verdi's productions, in addition to the operas referred to already, includes a "Messa da Requiem," written in 1873 in memory of Alessandro Manzoni, one part of a "Hymn of Nations" (the three other divi-

sions of which were written by Meyerbeer, Auber, and Sterndale Bennett), executed in London in 1862, an instrumental quartet, and a number of songs.

Thus much attention having been given to the musician's achievements, something should be said in relation to the man. He figured in politics for a few years, but rather through willingness to lend the brilliancy of his name to a representation of Italy's prominence in art, than with any other object. His fellow-citizens of Busseto, however, thought differently; when the duchy of Parma sought annexation to Italy, they remembered that Verdi had always been a Liberal, that he never went to court, and that he avoided meeting the Austrian residents. So they sent him to the Chamber of Deputies. After this honor was conferred upon him, Verdi was somewhat embarrassed as to his position, and Count Cavour's proposal to have him elected to the first Italian Parliament distressed him considerably. "I know you are not a politician," said Cavour, "but I desire that all men who have won distinction in the world of Italian art, science, or literature should meet in our first Parliament." Verdi was elected, of course, and served two or three years before resigning. In spite of his aversion to public life, King Victor Emmanuel appointed him a senator in 1875. His name will go down to posterity in connection with the political history of Italy, for, in addition to adorning the rolls of the Senate, it was used in 1859 and 1860 as a national rallying-cry and symbol during the Italian struggle for freedom. In those troublous days it was treason, naturally, to shout, "Viva Victor Emmanuele, Rè d'Italia," and when some phrase was sought as a sort of password and battle-shout, the people discovered that by writing and crying "Viva Verdi!" they gave utterance, in regular succession, to the initial letters of the forbidden sentence.

Verdi seldom leaves his native land. "L'amore del campanile," as the Italians put it ("the love of the steeple"), is as strong in him now as in his boyhood. He generally passes the winter in Genoa, and the summer at his splendid country-house of Sant' Agata, not far from Busseto. The estate stands almost in solitude in the center of a vast plain; a church and two or three peasants' houses being the only buildings in proximity to the *maestro's* dwelling. The surroundings are not at all picturesque. The soil is under thorough cultivation, but the well-tilled fields have no charm for the eye, and the long rows of poplars and the shallow brook babbling beside them are totally devoid of poetic or pictorial suggestiveness. The visitor comes suddenly upon two weeping-willows, and, beyond, a row of close-

planted trees half conceals a simple dwelling from the glance of the passer-by. Beyond the house a fine garden extends down to a small artificial lake. The *maestro* usually writes in his bedroom, situated on the ground floor and looking out upon the garden. The apartment is furnished with artistic profusion; a magnificent piano, a library, a massive inkstand, numberless sketches, statuettes, vases, and knick-knacks, court and repay inspection. Above the piano hangs an oil-painting of the aged Barezzi, Verdi's earliest friend and Mæcenæ, whose memory he still reveres.

The composer is an early riser. At Sant' Agata he is stirring at five in the morning. After the habitual cup of black coffee he takes a stroll in the garden. Then he rambles through the fields and gives orders to his gardener, previous to visiting the stables and barn-yard. In a couple of hours one stroke upon a bell summons him to a cup of *café au lait*, partaken of with his wife. At half-past ten the bell sounds again, and this time a more substantial meal, to be followed by a game of billiards or a long walk, is shared. The letter-carrier is due at two o'clock, and with his appearance the one hour of excitement of the day is welcomed. What with reading and writing five o'clock is soon at hand, and dinner is served. Then the composer indulges in a ride, and the evening is whiled away in conversation. At ten Verdi sets an example of early retirement; he disappears, and everybody does likewise.

At Busseto Verdi is fairly worshiped. The inhabitants once made up their minds that he ought to write an opera and have it performed on the spot, in order to raise funds for building a theater. The *maestro* did not view the matter in the same light, but expended ten thousand *lire* upon the construction of a local opera-house, which bears over its portico the name "Teatro Verdi." Among the memories of his childhood that Busseto most jealously preserves, one of special interest is placed in the dwelling of the Barezzi. Here it was that Verdi lived until 1849, when he bought Sant' Agata, a sorry place in those days, in comparison with the present domain. Through the care of Signor Demetrio Barezzi, a son of Verdi's old friend, the composer's room is in the same condition as when he occupied it, and the custodian shows it with pride to the sight-seeing tourist. If Verdi were to revisit the place, he would experience little difficulty in recognizing its every nook and corner. The familiar spirit of the house, however, would hardly recognize the man. As a youth the composer was pale and thin, with sunken

cheeks and eyes; the Verdi of the present is tall, powerful, and as cordial and robust in manner as he was taciturn and feeble in years gone by.

Time and space are both wanting for even a hasty estimate of the part Verdi's music has played in the musical history of the century. Whether, in driving from the field the gentle strains of Cimarosa and Paisiello, in counter-acting what Scudo calls the "debilitating irony" of Rossini's writings, and in swaying the attentive masses by appealing to their senses rather than to their imagination and intellect, he has contributed as largely to the growth of taste as a more skilled and thoughtful musician endowed with the same splendid creative faculty might have done, are questions that must remain open for discussion. In spite of his easy victories over audiences in a land where the listener goes into ecstasies over one fine *cantabile* phrase, and in which a single solo and a single duet will save an opera from oblivion, Verdi has not disregarded the ever-widening influence of German thought; and if he has not aimed at conciliating the disciples of pure Wagnerism, he has at least sought to free his later works from the absurdities characterizing many of his earliest achievements. In "La Forza del Destino," in "Don Carlos," and especially in "Aida," he has shown a desire to make his scores something more than collections of ballads and dance-themes; and in none of his mature efforts does the student happen upon the vulgar and saltatorial measures of which some of the choruses in "Ernani" may be cited as frightful examples. As a creative composer he stands without a rival. No one since Rossini has possessed the gift of melody and natural tone-color in so remarkable a degree, and the poorest of his operas would enrich for life, and as to themes, any of the over-ambitious and hard-working — after the fashion of the mosaic-makers of Venice — successful composers of modern France, Italy, and Germany. As to the future, Verdi's admirers need entertain no apprehensions. In half a century hence the complex civilization of the age may render "Tristan and Isolde" musical food for infants, while the Verdian *répertoire* will seem as remote as Lulli's and Monteverde's operas now appear. But some noble monuments of the composer's matchless powers will surely remain. Just as the sestet from "Lucia" will never pass away, so will the quartet from "Rigoletto" and the "Miserere" from "Il Trovatore" endure for many ages, and move millions of listeners to passion and to tears.

Frederick A. Schwab.